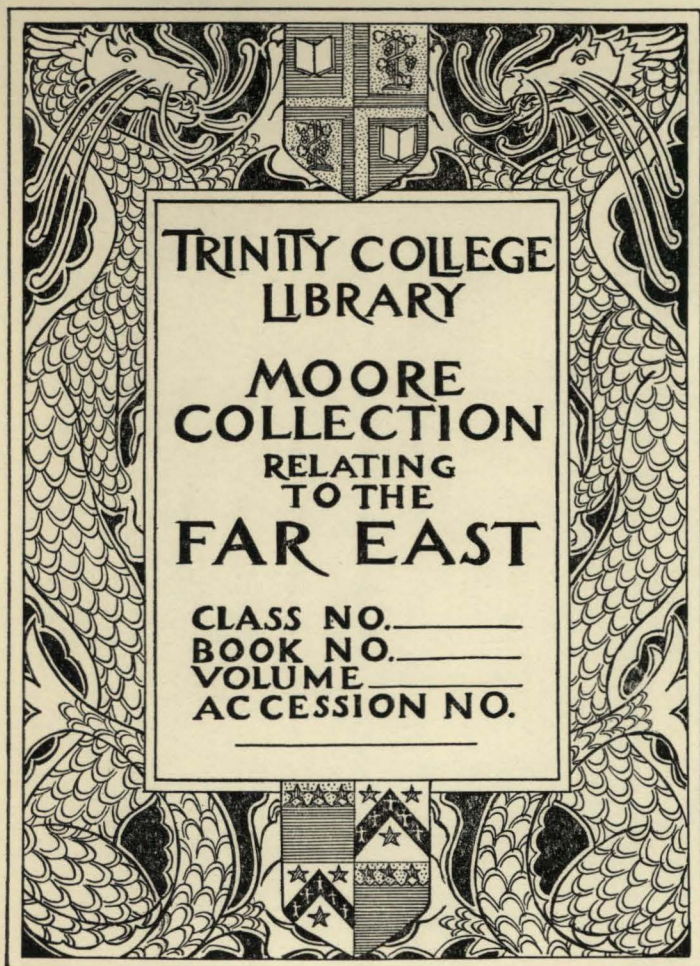


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ART SEEN THROUGH CHINESE AND WESTERN EYES

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ART SEEN THROUGH CHINESE AND WESTERN EYES*

BY SIR FRANCIS ROSE, BART.

THIS talk is to be a comparison of the Chinese and Western outlook on art. As time does not permit me to give a sketch of the history of Chinese art—much as I would like to do so—I shall have to take it for granted that my audience will have some knowledge of Chinese culture and art and will have read one or two of the classics.

The root of Chinese art, unlike that of Western art, lies in the written word. In China art turns round literature and is a vital part of it. One might call Chinese painting a decoration of literature. Yet this is not quite exact, as literature has quite another meaning to the Chinese than this. The written word is as much a picture as the picture is the written word; there is no dividing line.

For example, calligraphy is painting. The pictorial beauty of the word conveys a subtle literary beauty connected with ideas and sound in a way which it is impossible to translate into a foreign language, a beauty the meaning of which is inconceivable to the Westerner, whose script is merely a mechanical way of putting down ideas. Imagine looking at the letter T and hearing the most beautiful sound, having a joy as great as when the eye pauses on a Piero della Francesca, imagining wonderful verses and having the recollection of some subtle philosophical thought revived and stimulated; then perhaps you will get some idea of what Chinese calligraphy means.

The other fact concerning Chinese art, and perhaps where it differs most from the West, is that it is so close to philosophy that it is part of it.

The Chinese are not a religious people. They are inclined to jumble up their religions, picking what they find most reasonable from each. They are a very humorous people, a fact not to be forgotten when considering their art. But they are, above all, philosophical. Even in the mind of the coolie there is an instinctive metaphysical twist.

The two great religions in support of Chinese art have been Taoism and Buddhism: Taoism seeking truth in nature led thinkers towards landscapes, while Buddhism with its spiritual mysticism created an unsurpassed school of sculpture.

The birth of these two influences in art took place during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 219 A.D.), when there was a link with India. It was also at this period that the scholar became a professional artist, and literature and painting became one.

Here we come to two fundamental differences between China and the West: the first is the Taoist outlook on nature. Nature is perfect, and, as Taoism points out, human nature only became imperfect—fogged—by activity. Therefore, to the Chinese, human nature in its pure state is perfect. We Christians believe the opposite. It is only by activities—faith, hope and charity—that we can obtain salvation and liberation from the evils of the flesh.

The second is that the Chinese prefer to be ruled by scholars than by soldiers. The scholar-artist was therefore the official, and at the same time a sort of priest of culture. Learning is even today venerated in China.

It was, however, during the chaotic period of the Six Dynasties (220 to 588 A.D.) that landscape painting was probably discovered by Ku K'ai-chih. That desire for solitude and quietude, away from political struggles, which Taoism embodies, will be found responsible for the hermit Tsung Ping of Sung (420-477 A.D.) desiring to transfer his secrets of the wind, of flowing water and floating clouds on to paper. It was stated that he succeeded, and there is little reason for us to disbelieve if we look at the greatness of Chinese landscape painting.

The Chinese outlook on landscape is quite different from ours. While we try to interpret the external vision the Chinese turns his eyes inward. Like Tsung Ping he

* Report of an address delivered to the China Society by Sir Francis Rose Bart., on Thursday, February 14, 1946. Sir William Hornell presided.

tries to transfer the secret, the essence of the water, and not paint a picture of the scene.

What the great Chinese landscape artist paints must be the Truth, not the personal interpretation of a vision seen through the eyes, the latter being the highest form of Western landscape painting, such as Patiner's mountains, the gardens of Fra Angelico or Piero della Francesca's hills of Urbino.

The Chinese artist also works on a system of principles different from our own. These six principles also date to the period of the Warring States, and were formulated by Hsieh Ho of the Ch'i dynasty (479-502 A.D.), who was a famous critic. They are still used today and read thus :

Rhythmic vitality.
Structure and brush-work.
Modelling after object.
Adaptation with colouring.
Careful placing and composition.
Following and copying.

The sixth—following and copying—is very significant, for here again there is a great difference between the Chinese and the Western artist. The Chinese artist is always casting his eyes backward. He is proud of copying more or less exactly the works of the great masters of the past. "It is in the past that the secret of the future lies," could be called his motto.

There are no secrets, no techniques, that have not been already discovered, and it is only in perfecting and amending that true originality can be achieved. The whole of the great and wise Chinese civilization has for the last three thousand years been making new things out of the old.

I have already described the fundamental difference between the Chinese and the Westerner on the nature of painting, and the possibility for the Chinese to practise Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism side by side. But what is very hard for the Westerner to understand, not to say feel, is the current or stream of quietness which flows through Chinese art, like a river, like a waterfall, like the shadow of the pine tree, like musical sound: a poem bringing sound and material sensation into the realms of art.

Thus Chinese poetry rose to its greatest height in the golden age of art, the T'ang dynasty (618-905 A.D.), which one might compare to the Italian Renaissance in Europe. The Emperor Hsüan Tsung, who claimed the ancestry with Lao Tzŭ, was a painter and calligraphist. He invented the famous bamboo stroke, and the story told about this is a charming one.

One day when the moon was full he saw the branch of a bamboo silhouetted on the paper of his window. Taking his ink and brush, he tried to catch the intensity of colour in the shadow with a few strokes on the paper.

The intensity of colour is a problem which only the Chinese artists have tried to fathom. The palette of brilliant colours was not necessary for them; ink sufficed them; in ink all the colours were to be found as in the shadow. Indeed, at this period "ink flowed instead of formal lines and colours," and the great school of wash drawing, called the Northern School, was born in opposition to the minute and highly detailed Southern School. Speaking generally, the Northern School has stood for the revolutionary, the poetic and Taoist metaphysical conception, while the precise Southern School has been the official, the religious, and one might say Confucianist outlook.

However, Wang Wei, founder of the Southern School, who lived in the middle T'ang period, was a poet of incredible depth and delicacy. He spent his life in the great simplicity of the meditative Zen Buddhist sect, which was very near to Taoism. He lived by the mountain streams, listening to poetry and the sound of the lute. The Chinese consider him the perfect "Wên Jên Hua"—scholar-artist. His work is unmistakable, even to Western eyes. His snow scenes and little houses built with his sensitive touch "make his pictures poems, as his poems were pictures." None has painted snow more intensely or used empty spaces more perfectly. He worked with ink and water washed with colour.

A typical Chinese story is told about the two methods of painting. At the court of Hsüan Tsung were two great masters: Wu Tao-tzŭ, who had changed the style of landscape painting, and Li Ssŭ-hsün, who worked in the old precise and laborious method and was considered the greatest colourist of his day. One day the Emperor ordered them both to paint the same landscape as if for a competition. Li began immediately and worked for three months with ink and brilliant colours. Wu, however, waited, idling his time under pine trees and listening to running streams, but observing all the time, until one day the inspired landscape appeared to him, clear and inwardly beautiful. Taking up his brush he cast his vision on his paper before the sun had time to shift the shadow of his hand.

When the two pictures were brought before the Emperor he saw they were equally beautiful, so he rewarded each artist equally.

With the Sung dynasty (906-1276 A.D.) came a period of great sensibility and refinement which can hardly be compared with any in the West. It was typically Chinese, for it was the building of originality from the creative genius that had gone before it. From the potter's wheel rose forms that have never been surpassed by any nation of artists. Sonorous or "sweet tinkling" porcelain, covered with glazes of a beauty that alone the milky preciousness of jade could surpass, were invented. Artists were at the height of their prestige, and many of the emperors were painters of quality. Emperor Hui Tsung, a landscape painter, whose work still gives joy, wished all his officials to be artists. The age abounded in great masters.

Sleeping Dragon Li and Su Tung-p'o originated a custom only known in China, that of co-operative painting. Men of letters would meet at some lonely pavilion perched on a mountain rock, and over the wine cup in a kind of poetic drunkenness, which was joyous, much praised and respected, and quite unlike our Western tipping, would read verses and compose pictures together. On the picture "Pine and Rocks" these words are woven into the composition: "Tung-p'o himself formed the jagged rocks; he left the lonely pine for Sleeping Dragon."*

Hsia Kuei and Ma Yüan, of the Northern School, brought Chinese art to its peak. They were perhaps the greatest masters of empty space and vast expanse the world has ever known. With their bold new brush strokes they painted some of the finest landscapes of any artist.

Of all the Western painters it was only Turner in his latter days who tried to convey this meaning. In portraiture and figure work Ma Yüan was as virile as Goya and as observant as Daubigny. The unbelievable sensitiveness of Hsia Kuei's handling of a "A Thousand Miles of the Yangtze River" is a sheer miracle, never to be explained. This long scroll almost transcends painting. It may be called above poetry, more than the eye sees or the heart feels; in fact, a cinema film of the soul. It is a pure philosophical abstraction interpreted in paint; yet there is no other painting I tire less of or enjoy more looking at.

It is alone the long Chinese scroll painting that can catch a sense of distance, of the inexistence of time, of the change of climate, of foliage and seasons, and of the richness of nature. No painting, seen as a whole, in one glance can convey the subtlety. It must also be remembered that Chinese paintings, unlike Western ones, are not meant for hanging on walls, but to be seen in quietness, at auspicious seasons and in a steady state of mind.

A scroll picture which remains vividly in my mind is one of the Sung Southern School,† which has a terrifying quality, unsurpassed for subtlety. It is minutely painted and represents a bank of flowers, being slowly devoured by white cabbage butterflies and various insects. At the end of this brilliant and apparently gay picture there is an interpretation of vegetable rot and animal desecration, which is spiritually sinister.

The Southern School of the Sung dynasty was responsible for the famous style called "Bird and Flower Painting," of an exquisite and delicate workmanship, brushed on the fine silk with bright colours. This style was also known as "Pastime

* The custom of co-operative painting still survives in modern China.

† In the Bahr collection.

Painting," and the favourite subjects of the literary men who worked this way were the Four Gentlemen—plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum.

A truly great master led the Southern School, Mi Fei, the landscapist, whose technique was a new one with little splashes of ink. In some ways he suggests a Seurat of Chinese art.

When comparing Chinese with Western painting, an important factor, which must not be forgotten, is the artist's consideration for the materials of his craft. While in the West the painter thinks of them only as tools, in China he believes them to be as important as the picture itself. The choice of an ink stone, the making and preparation of ink, and the placing of paint brushes are all ceremonies. And, above all, the correct way of holding the brush for each kind of stroke demands more manual practice than playing the piano and as much sense of touch as that of a violin player. Inks are kept for many years, and are often decorated to a great height of beauty. They are works of art by themselves, and there are as many different kinds of shades as there are colours on any Western artist's palette.

The paper or silk on which the picture is to be painted is stretched on a long table and reverently treated. Deep concentration, a form of meditation on the plain surface, is often practised. This philosophical conception of working is difficult for the Westerner to grasp, for it is a quest for inward quiet. It might be said that such an outlook would be obstructive to any new form of art. Yet it has not been the case in China, for although the traditional methods of working are always followed, there have been great Chinese revolutionaries.

I have not time to deal with the other periods of Chinese art, such as the foreign Mongol dynasty, the reactionary Chinese Ming, and the Ch'ing or Manchu dynasty, which was at its height in the eighteenth century, and was an age in art not unlike our own in post-war days, when the word "decorative" became a symbol of its own and interior decoration something apart from the rest of art.

Alone two great names stand out startlingly from the early days of the Ch'ing dynasty; Pa-Ta Shan Jên and Shih-t'ao. Like Picasso and Matisse, their subjects are conventional, but their methods new. A spiritual violence gave them a freedom which left both ancient and modern tradition to care for themselves. The influence of these two masters is strongly felt by modern Chinese artists.

Perhaps at this point I can mention the link between Chinese and Western art. It is only in recent years that this link has become apparent but misunderstood. The Western artist of the twentieth century has become aware that he must look inwards for his inspiration. Even the most spiritual of European art, such as the Gothic builders and sculptors, the Italian Primitives and pictures like Piero di Cosimo's "Forest Fire" at Oxford, and the mysticism of Greco and Goya, had always been outward or heaven-ward looking. The result of this new realization has been a turmoil. I would like to call it a battle with the dream world. I wish the dream world had not been defeated. Ronoult alone seems to have half penetrated to the world of the spirit. Picasso recently has tried to experiment, without complete success, along a line of thought which Pa-Ta Shan Jên and Shih-t'ao thoroughly understood. It was his Western medium which defeated him, especially his desire to destroy the respect for paint and the materials of his craft which Western art demands.

The desire for more sensitive—I call them transcending—mediums is obvious in the work of the more interesting young artists, but they are given to tricks with oils, chalk and ink which only lead to organized accidents. There is lacking that certainty of touch, that peace of the mind which only philosophical clarity can produce.

It is my personal belief that it is in Chinese art that the West can find the food for which it is craving. Not copying in the Western sense, but in looking back and creating. Perhaps in this world, which is becoming international and should be catholic or universal, it will be the West that will carry on that living and ancient artistic civilization China commenced far back in the dim days of pre-history.

